

*WorldSpace Foundation and UNICEF's Operation Lifeline Sudan - Using Innovative Communication Technology for Social Development*

*By Rose Tchwenko*

A little girl sits in a refugee camp in Southern Sudan. She is alone, having lost her parents and most of her family in a civil war that has ravaged this East African nation for over three decades. She is in the care of UNICEF relief workers who run the camp as part of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS). She giggles as she listens to an entertaining education program for children on WorldSpace Foundation's Africa Learning Channel. She may not fully grasp the meaning of the words, but she is getting help from a relief worker who provides a loose translation in the local dialect. The story she hears is one that has been told to generations of African children by their parents and grandparents. It is a story told in Africa, by Africans, for African children.

The real victims of the fighting in Sudan are the defenseless men, women and children who have been forcibly removed from their homes. UNICEF estimates that there are over 4 million displaced persons in Sudan. They have had to resettle in makeshift and often isolated communities with little or no access to basic amenities such as sanitation and primary health care. They harbor little hope of ever returning to their homes or reuniting with their families. Furthermore, due to a non-existent communications infrastructure, the refugees are cut off from most basic information sources. Children are unable to attend school. Public health workers and medical practitioners have very limited access to the latest research and information about the diseases that plague the communities in which they work. Basically, the displaced people of Sudan survive in a virtual information vacuum.

Two groups have formed a partnership to provide a solution to this problem. UNICEF-OLS has teamed up with WorldSpace Foundation to bring social development and educational material to isolated communities in Sudan. Using WorldSpace technology, community members can download web-based content directly to community information centers that have no phone lines and hence, no Internet connection. Health workers can read the latest articles from such major medical journals as the *British Medical Journal*. Teachers can obtain training and classroom support material. The community can receive the latest news from around the world, as well as up-to-the-minute weather conditions for their region. In the words of a community worker in Yambio, Sudan, as he observed a demonstration of the WorldSpace system's capabilities, his community now receives information that is a "gift from God."

UNICEF-OLS brings this "gift" to isolated Sudanese communities by using WorldSpace Foundation's multimedia service to transmit data. The foundation provides the service, which includes training and on-going technical support to UNICEF-OLS workers in the field, at the lowest possible cost. UNICEF-OLS also gets free access to additional social development and educational programming on WorldSpace Foundation's flagship audio project, the Africa Learning Channel (ALC). In Africa, persons in the middle of the Sahara or deep within the rain forests can pick up the AfriStar™ signal using a WorldSpace digital radio receiver.

Each receiver has an integrated satellite dish the size of a teacup saucer. The receiver operates mainly on electricity or batteries, although it has been successfully adapted for solar power, and produces crystal clear CD-quality digital sound. Before WorldSpace, the lack of suitable infrastructure to support new and old information technologies such as the Internet, telephone, and radio in rural and isolated regions of the developing world meant that information reached mainly the inhabitants of major urban centers. Attempts to bring these technologies to rural areas had proven to be prohibitively expensive to implement and maintain.

Endowed with 5% of the capacity on each of three WorldSpace satellites, WorldSpace Foundation has been working in Africa since 1999 and will soon begin its work in Asia/Pacific. Further, the foundation expects its work in Latin America and the Caribbean to begin in late 2002. The Africa Learning Channel is WorldSpace Foundation's flagship project and a powerful tool that empowers African communities to address their communication needs. This learning channel concept was developed after the foundation conducted extensive research and gathered input from various groups in Africa about the information needs of an African audience.

WorldSpace Foundation produces the Africa Learning Channel by collecting program content from African groups on a variety of topics and then post-producing the material for transmission on the satellite. In exchange, the foundation places receivers with partner groups at low cost, and ensures the dissemination of the groups' programming to a much wider audience than traditionally possible. The foundation promotes a policy of "one receiver reaching many ears" by encouraging partners to organize coordinated listening groups in communities where receivers have been placed. Listening groups enable discussion of the program content and the education of many. Currently, the ALC has an estimated audience of 1.2 million people based on reports from partners in 21 African countries.

Initially, the biggest challenge faced by WorldSpace Foundation was convincing prospective program partners and donors that the concept of a satellite broadcasting directly to a radio receiver was more than just a theory. Prior to the launching of AfriStar™ in 1998, the idea was unproven and demonstrations were based on abstract computer simulations of how the technology might work. Now that the Africa Learning Channel is operational and foundation staff can demonstrate the technology to potential content providers in real time, interest in both the audio and multimedia services has grown tremendously.

Today, WorldSpace Foundation's challenge is trying to keep up with requests from interested parties, and raising money to augment our services in Africa and expand programming to the Asia-Pacific region. As a publicly supported 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, WorldSpace Foundation relies on grants, donations, corporate funding, other foundations, and government-sponsored programs as sources of support. The foundation continues to form new partnerships, and explore new applications of the technology. For more information about WorldSpace Foundation programs, please visit the foundation's web site at [www.worldspace.org](http://www.worldspace.org).